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March 2, 2021

**The importance of transparency**

In its milestone judgment, the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) declared the results of NA-75 Daska by-elections null and void and ordered re- polls in the constituency on March 18. The ECP decision has confirmed the allegations that the by-poll in NA-75 was not fair, free and transparent.

In its short order, the ECP has declared that: “From the perusal of available record produced by the parties, the Returning Officer, as well as collected by the Commission through different sources, we have come to the conclusion that a conducive environment was not available for the candidates and voters of the constituency and the election in the subject constituency has not been conducted honestly, justly, fairly and in a transparent manner.”

The ECP order further says that: “incidents of murders, firing and injuries, bad law and order situation in the subject constituency [created] harassment for voters and other circumstances leading to make the process of results doubtful/unascertainable.”

The ECP has also decided to take action against the local administration and all those presiding officers who mysteriously went missing for hours. This decision is another practical step to make elections fair and transparent. The action against officials will send a clear message that no one should mess with the elections. Slowly but steadily, we are making progress towards free, fair and credible elections.

The ECP verdict is a big blow for the PTI which had denied any wrongdoing in the by-election. The ECP decision has raised many questions on the conduct of the local administration and the Punjab government. Instead of shifting the blame on others, it is better for the PTI to accept the fact that mistakes were made and lessons need to be learnt from those mistakes.

There is no doubt that free, fair, transparent and clean elections are the basic responsibility of the ECP but political parties have an important role to play as well. If the political parties contest the elections in accordance with the law and follow the code of conduct prepared for elections, it will help make elections clean.

The ECP alone cannot conduct clean and fair elections without the support of the political parties and the administration from the national to the local levels. Winning elections is important but equally important is establishing and strengthening the democratic traditions and culture. Political parties must discourage the strong-arm tactics used by their candidates during elections.

Democratic governments gain legitimacy through free, fair and transparent elections. The will of the people expressed freely through authentic elections is the foundation for the authority of a democratic government. Transparency in the election process – from campaigning to election results – is a must for credible elections.

Free, fair, transparent and open elections strengthen the democratic process and help establish confidence in democracy. A flawed and rigged election system creates doubts about the outcome of the elections and also raises questions on the legitimacy of an elected government.

We need to further strengthen transparent election procedures, from the casting of votes to the counting and consolidation of results, to encourage participation in and support for the electoral system. Transparency is essential to the electoral process because it eliminates the appearance of impropriety and limits the possibility of electoral fraud.

A transparent election process does not simply depend on voter registration, free campaigning, monitors, transparent procedures and secret ballots; it must also be able to deal promptly and effectively with the different types of complaints that will inevitably arise – everything from the denial of voter registration to an individual who attempts to suppress voter turnout.

The Election Commission of Pakistan needs to develop an efficient and reliable mechanism to address the complaints of voters and candidates on polling day. Timely intervention could solve many problems that occur during polling.

A lot needs to be done in Pakistan to make the election process reliable. Every election exposes flaws in our electoral system but nobody seems to be serious about fixing them.

The ECP organised by-elections in eight constituencies – five provincial and three National Assembly seats. On seven seats, the election was organised in a relatively peaceful and orderly manner. The PPP has successfully retained its seats in Sindh, winning two provincial and one National Assembly seat. The results in Karachi, Sanghar and Tharparkar by elections have proved that the PPP is still popular in Sindh and the PTI has failed to retain its vote bank in these constituencies. The PTI candidate in Malir lost around 12,000 votes. In the 2018 elections, the PTI candidate bagged more than 16,000 votes while in 2021 its candidate could only manage to get 4,400 votes and finished behind the TLP at third place.

In Tharparkar, the PTI candidate lost almost 22,000 votes while the PPP gained nearly 23,000 votes. In 2018, the PTI candidate got more than 72,000 votes, while the PPP candidate got more than 80,000 votes. In these by-elections, the PPP candidate bagged nearly 1, 03,000 votes against the 50,000 votes of the PTI candidate.

The PTI also suffered a shocking defeat in the Nowshera by-elections. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is considered a stronghold of the PTI and the Nowshera district is the fortress of Pervez Khattak. The PTI won all the national and provincial seats from the Nowshera district in the 2018 general elections, but this time the party failed to defend its seat. The surprise winner is the PML-N, courtesy the PPP and JUI-F. The internal differences of the PTI and Pervez Khattak’s family also contributed to this defeat. This defeat is a real setback for the PTI in KP.

This election tells us that if the opposition wants to give a tough time to the PTI in the next general elections in KP then the only viable option is to form an alliance or make seat adjustment to field the strongest possible candidates.

The PML-N retained its provincial assembly seat in Wazirabad. The two by-elections have clearly shown that the PML-N has been able to retain its vote bank in Punjab. They have proved that the PML-N is still a force to reckon with, and Maryam Nawaz is not only a crowd puller but also a voter puller.

The PTI does have something to celebrate though: it reduced the victory margin of the PML-N in both constituencies and managed to increase its vote bank significantly.

The PTI could have emerged as a much more powerful party even after losing both the seats. But the NA-75 fiasco has caused greater damage to a party that champions’ clean’ politics.

The writer is a freelance journalist.